

Massachusetts Family Caregiver Support Program

CHOOSING A SUPPORT GROUP

By Harriet Udoff, M.S.E.

You've made the decision—it's high time to affiliate with a caregiver support group. But how do you make the best choice, among ample offerings throughout the state?

Support in making a selection that's right for you is at hand. While documentation about the benefits of attending Alzheimer's support groups abounds, little has been written about *how* caregivers should go about finding the most suitable group.

Here are some suggestions for choosing a support group. Since it is not an exact science, doing some homework beforehand will help you to find the group that's right for you.

Systematic approach. First, read and find out about support groups. The primary purpose of a group should be to help provide you with education/knowledge about the disease as well as caregiving skills. The combination of education and emotional support should enable the caregiver to feel better at the end of the evening. Know that you have valuable information, insight, and experience to share. You can help others!

All support groups are different. They take on the characteristics of the leader(s) as well as the participants, which underscores the value of doing your homework before joining a group. If possible, call the leader before the group meeting with a list of prepared questions. For example:

- Who makes up the group? (e.g., spouses, adult children, men, and women.)
- Where is the group located? (Nursing home support groups tend to comprise more caregivers of their residents; community groups tend to offer a mixture with more patients still living at home.)
- How often are meetings? (The more often the meetings take place, the more quickly members may form emotional bonds.) How long are the meetings?

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- How often are there speakers or films? (Groups that are educational in nature tend to be different than those in which films or other tools are rarely used. It's worth asking who determines this, the leaders or the membership.)
- Find out if the membership policy is open, or whether there are times that new members are not accepted.
- Ask about confidentiality...if it's not talked about, it *is* worth discussing. All information shared at a support group should be kept strictly confidential unless it poses a safety risk to caregiver or patient.

Persistence pays. Don't get discouraged if the first group you attend isn't what you want. Be patient, and keep looking until you find the group that's right for you. As many seasoned support group members would say, "it's well worth it."

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